

City seeks to examine whether South L.A. oil drilling site has flouted rules



Redeemer Community Partnership president Richard Parks speaks at a protest outside of a drilling site at Jefferson Boulevard and Budlong Avenue in South Los Angeles last year. (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

By **Emily Alpert Reyes**

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In South Los Angeles, community activists had long complained that the city failed to follow up on neighborhood concerns about foul smells, noise and other nuisances from an oil drilling site.

Now Los Angeles is taking a first step toward scrutinizing whether Freeport-McMoRan, the company that runs the Jefferson Boulevard facility, has flouted city conditions imposed on the drilling site.

The Department of City Planning recently sent the petroleum company a letter, requiring it to turn in an

application that would ultimately trigger a public hearing on whether its oil operations are in line with city rules.

Planning officials would also weigh whether the existing rules are adequate to protect neighbors living near the drilling site, which sits closer to homes and other “sensitive sites” than any other Los Angeles drilling facility, according to the nonprofit Community Health Councils.

Environmental and neighborhood activists hope that process could spur new conditions for how the facility is run, including requiring drilling equipment to be enclosed in a building to insulate neighbors from noise and smells. They see the decision as a key move toward Los Angeles exercising its municipal powers over oil operations.

“This is a sign that the city is doing its job,” said Richard Parks, president of Redeemer Community Partnership, a nonprofit that has repeatedly raised concerns about neighborhood oil operations. “This is just a first step -- but it’s an opportunity for neighbors to give voice to how this site has been impacting them for years.”

A Freeport-McMoRan spokesman declined to comment on the city move. In a letter to planning officials this week, company attorney Jeffrey Dintzer said there was no legal justification for the city request, stating that any problems since the company took over the Jefferson site had been minor and were “promptly corrected in every instance.”

Freeport-McMoRan “vigorously objects to any effort by the city to unilaterally modify conditions ... as no evidence has been identified that further conditions or modifications are necessary or legally permissible,” Dintzer wrote. Until the city provides more evidence of “validated nuisances,” he said, the oil company had been advised not to turn in the requested paperwork.

The California Independent Petroleum Assn., which counts the company among its members, was alarmed by the city move. Launching the city process for a drilling site “in full compliance with the applicable rules and regulations blatantly ignores the vested rights of the operators of these facilities,” its chief executive, Rock Zierman, said in a statement Friday.

Environmental activists from the law firm Earthjustice argued in a petition to the city earlier this year that there was ample reason to tighten the rules on the Jefferson site, which sits close enough to neighboring homes that some apartments overlook its walls. Records from the South Coast Air Quality Management District also show that the agency has twice detected excessive emissions from a water treatment unit in recent years. In one case, an inspector said he smelled an odor like diesel exhaust.

“The evidence has been presented by the people who live near the facility,” Earthjustice staff attorney Angela Johnson Meszaros said, citing complaints of odors, vibrations, noise and glaring lights. “These are the things that impact the community on an ongoing basis.”

Decades ago, when the city first decided to allow drilling there, a zoning official wrote that “all features of oil drilling and production must be strictly controlled to eliminate any possible odor, noise, vibrations, hazards” and other annoyances.

Eight years ago, the city added that if there was evidence of “continued violation” of any of the conditions, “resulting in an unreasonable level of disruption or interference with the peaceful enjoyment” of neighboring properties, zoning officials could begin a process to reexamine and possibly alter the city conditions.

The letter to Freeport-McMoRan, signed by Chief Zoning Administrator Linn Wyatt, says that the oil company must turn in the requested paperwork and fees by the beginning of September. Councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who represents the area west of USC where the drilling site is located, welcomed the city’s move.

“I have said that the planning department should respond to the issues put forward by residents,” the councilman said in a statement. “I’m glad to see that process is moving forward.”

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